

# AMERICAN POETRY NOW

*Edited by SYLVIA PLATH*

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*A Selection of the best poems by  
modern American writers*

CRITICAL QUARTERLY POETRY SUPPLEMENT  
NUMBER 2

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*Cover design:* T. E. Burrill

## INTRODUCTION

*American Poetry Now* is a selection of poems by new and/or youngish American poets for the most part unknown in Britain. I'll let the vigour and variety of these poems speak for themselves.

Daniel G. Hoffman's 'An Armada of Thirty Whales' is taken from his book of that title, Yale University Press; Howard Nemerov's 'I Only Am Escaped Alone To Tell Thee' and 'The Vacuum' from *The Salt Garden*, Little, Brown and Co.; George Starbuck's 'Ab Ovo' from *Bone Thoughts*, Yale University Press; William Stafford's 'In The Oregon Country', 'The Well Rising' and 'A Survey' from *West of Your City*, Talisman Press; Denise Levertov's 'The Five-Day Rain' from *With Eyes at The Back Of Our Heads* by Denise Levertov, Copyright © 1958, 1959 by Denise Levertov Goodman, reprinted by permission of New Directions, Publishers; Richard Wilbur's 'Potato' from *Poems 1943-1956*, Faber and Faber; Adrienne Rich's 'Living in Sin' from *The Diamond Cutters* by Adrienne Cecile Rich, copyright 1953 by Adrienne Rich Conrad, reprinted by permission of Harper and Brothers; W. S. Merwin's 'The Native' from *The Drunk In The Furnace*, Rupert Hart-Davis; Edgar Bowers's 'The Stoic: For Laura Von Courten' from *The Form of Loss* by Edgar Bowers, reprinted by permission of the publisher, Alan Swallow, copyright 1956 by Edgar Bowers; Anne Sexton's 'Kind Sir: These Woods' and 'Some Foreign Letters' from *To Bedlam And Back*, Houghton Mifflin Co.; and W. D. Snodgrass's 'The Marsh' and 'Operation' from *Heart's Needle* by permission of the Marvell Press, Hessele, Yorks. Barbara Guest's 'The Brown Studio', Anthony Hecht's '“More Light! More Light!”', Hyam Plutzik's 'Concerning the Painting “Afternoon in Infinity” By Attilio Salemme' and W. S. Merwin's 'Pedigrees' were first printed in *The Nation*, and W. S. Merwin's 'Another Year Come' in *The New Yorker*, © 1960 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc. Thanks are also due to Louis Simpson for permission to print 'The Dream Coast', to E. Lucas Myers for 'Fools Encountered', to Adrienne Rich for 'The Evil Eye' and 'Moving in Winter', and to Robert Creeley for 'The Way'.

Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain permission to print a poem by Gregory Corso.

Sylvia Plath



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## AN ARMADA OF THIRTY WHALES

(Galleons in sea-pomp) sails  
over the emerald ocean.

The ceremonial motion  
of their ponderous race is

given dandiacal graces  
in the ballet of their geysers.

Eyes deep-set in whalebone vizors  
have found a Floridian beach;

they leave their green world to fish.  
Like the Pliocene midge, they declare

their element henceforth air.  
What land they walk upon

becomes their Holy Land;  
when these pilgrims have all found tongue

how their canticles shall be sung!  
They nudge the beach with their noses,

eager for hedgerows and roses;  
they raise their great snouts from the sea

and exulting gigantically  
each trumpets a sousaphone wheeze

and stretches his finfitted knees.  
But they who won't swim and can't stand

lie mired in mud and in sand,  
And the sea and the wind and the worms

will contest the last will of the Sperms.

*Daniel G. Hoffman*

## I ONLY AM ESCAPED ALONE TO TELL THEE

I tell you that I see her still  
At the dark entrance of the hall.  
One gas lamp burning near her shoulder  
Shone also from her other side  
Where hung the long inaccurate glass  
Whose pictures were as troubled water.  
An immense shadow had its hand  
Between us on the floor, and seemed  
To hump the knuckles nervously,  
A giant crab readying to walk,  
Or a blanket moving in its sleep.

You will remember, with a smile  
Instructed by movies to reminisce,  
How strict her corsets must have been,  
How the huge arrangements of her hair  
Would certainly betray the least  
Impassionate displacement there.  
It was no rig for dallying,  
And maybe only marriage could  
Derange that queenly scaffolding—  
As when a great ship, coming home,  
Coasts in the harbor, dropping sail  
And loosing all the tackle that had laced  
Her in the long lanes . . . .

I know  
We need not draw this figure out.  
But all that whalebone came from whales.  
And all the whales lived in the sea,  
In calm beneath the troubled glass,  
Until the needle drew their blood.

I see her standing in the hall,  
Where the mirror's lashed to blood and foam,  
And the black flukes of agony  
Beat at the air till the light blows out.

*Howard Nemerov*

## THE VACUUM

The house is so quiet now  
The vacuum cleaner sulks in the corner closet,  
Its bag limp as a stopped lung, its mouth  
Grinning into the floor, maybe at my  
Slovenly life, my dog-dead youth.

I've lived this way long enough,  
But when my old woman died her soul  
Went into that vacuum cleaner, and I can't bear  
To see the bag swell like a belly, eating the dust  
And the woolen mice, and begin to howl

Because there is old filth everywhere  
She used to crawl, in the corner and under the stair.  
I know now how life is cheap as dirt,  
And still the hungry, angry heart  
Hangs on and howls, biting at air.

*Howard Nemerov*

## AB OVO

Beak gumming my entrails,  
wings elbowing my temples,  
there's this bird wants out.

Suppose I just let crack,  
and he rolls out the red neck,  
where would you put your foot?

If he bows a backward knee,  
if he stands there woodenly,  
is this a dove, or what?

Lady, he may be moist,  
liquid-tongued, not voiced,  
with wattles on his throat.

Lady, in a word,  
this fabled headlong bird  
Love is a strange coot.

*George Starbuck*

## IN THE OREGON COUNTRY

From old Fort Walla Walla and the Klickitats  
to Umpqua near Port Orford, stinking fish tribes  
massacred our founders, the thieving whites.

Chief Rotten Belly slew them at a feast;  
Kamiakin riled the Snakes and Yakimas;  
all spurted arrows through the Cascades west.

Those tribes became debris on their own lands:  
Captain Jack's wide face above the rope,  
his Modoc women dead with twitching hands.

The last and the most splendid, Nez Percé  
Chief Joseph, fluttering eagles through Idaho,  
dashed his pony-killing getaway.

They got him. Repeating rifles bored at his head,  
and in one fell look Chief Joseph saw the game  
out of that spiral mirror all explode.

Back of the Northwest map their country goes,  
mountains yielding and hiding fold on fold,  
gorged with yew trees that were good for bows.

*William Stafford*

## THE WELL RISING

The well rising without sound,  
the spring on a hillside,  
the plowshare brimming through deep ground  
everywhere in the field—

The sharp swallows in their swerve  
flaring and hesitating  
hunting for the final curve  
coming closer and closer—

The swallow heart from wing beat to wing beat  
counseling decision, decision:  
thunderous examples. I place my feet  
with care in such a world.

*William Stafford*



## A SURVEY

Down in the Frantic Mountains  
they say a canyon winds  
crammed with hysterical water  
hushed by placid sands.

They tried to map that country,  
sent out a field boot crew,  
but the river surged at night  
and ripped the map in two.

So they sent out wildcats, printed  
with intricate lines of fur,  
to put their paws with such finesse  
the ground was unaware.

Now only the wildcats know it,  
patting a tentative paw,  
soothing the hackles of ridges,  
pouring past rocks and away.

The sun rakes that land each morning;  
the mountains buck and scream.  
By night the wildcats pad by  
gazing it quiet again.

*William Stafford*

## THE FIVE-DAY RAIN

The washing hanging from the lemon tree  
in the rain  
and the grass long and coarse.

Sequence broken, tension  
of bitter-orange sunlight  
frayed off.

So light a rain

fine shreds  
pending above the rigid leaves.

Wear scarlet! Tear the green lemons  
Off the tree! I don't want  
to forget who I am, what has burned in me,  
and hang limp and clean, an empty dress—

*Denise Levertov*

## THE DREAM COAST

Here I am, troubling the dream coast  
With my New York face,  
Bearing among the realtors  
And tennis-players my dark preoccupation.

There once was an epical clatter—  
Voices and banjos, Tennessee, Ohio,  
Rising like incense in the sight of heaven.  
Today, there is an angel in the gate.

Lie back, Walt Whitman,  
There, on the fabulous raft with the King and the Duke!  
For the white row of the Marina  
Faces the Rock. Turn round the wagons here.

Lie back! We cannot bear  
The stars any more, those infinite spaces.  
Let the realtors divide the mountain,  
For they have already subdivided the valley.

Rectangular city blocks astonished  
Herodotus in Babylon,  
Cortez in Tenochtitlan,  
And here's the same old city-planner, death.

We cannot turn or stay.  
For though we sleep, and let the reins fall slack,  
The great cloud-wagons move  
In silence still, dreaming of the Pacific.

*Louis Simpson*

## THE BROWN STUDIO

Walking into the room  
after having spent a night in the grove  
by the river  
its duskiness surprised me.

The dark hours I had spent under foliage,  
the forms I had seen were all sombre,  
even the music was distinctly shady, the water  
had left me melancholy, my hands I had rinsed

were muddy. I had seen only one bird with a bright  
wing, the rest were starlings,

the brownness alarmed me.

I saw the black stove, the black chair,  
the black coat. I saw the easel, remembering it as  
an ordinary wood tone, rather pale, I realized  
it was inky, as were the drawings.

Of course you weren't there, but a photograph was.  
Actually a negative. Your hair didn't show up at all.  
Where that fairness had lit the open ground,

now there was an emptiness, beginning to darken.

I believed if I spoke,  
if a word came from my throat  
and entered this room whose walls had been turned,

it would be the color of the cape  
We saw in Aix in the studio of Cézanne,  
it hung near the death's head, the umbrella,  
the palette cooled to grey,

if I spoke loudly enough,  
knowing the arc from real to phantom.  
the fall of my voice would be,  
a dying brown.

*Barbara Guest*

## POTATO

### FOR ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

An underground grower, blind and a common brown;  
Got a misshapen look, it's nudged where it could;  
Simple as soil yet crowded as earth with all.

Cut open raw, it looses a cool clean stench,  
Mineral acid seeping from pores of prest meal;  
It is like breaching a strangely refreshing tomb:

Therein the taste of first stones, the hands of dead slaves,  
Waters men drank in the earliest frightful woods,  
Flint chips, and peat, and the cinders of buried camps.

Scrubbed under faucet water the planet skin  
Polishes yellow, but tears to the plain insides;  
Parching, the white's blue-hearted like hungry hands.

All of the cold dark kitchens, and war-frozen grey  
Evening at window; I remember so many  
Peeling potatoes quietly into chipt pails.

'It was potatoes saved us, then kept us alive.'  
Then they had something to say akin to praise  
For the mean earth-apples, too common to cherish or steal.

Times being hard, the Sikh and the Senegalese,  
Hobo and Okie, the body of Jesus the Jew,  
Vestigial virtues, are eaten; we shall survive.

What has not lost its savour shall hold us up,  
And we are praising what saves us, what fills the need.  
(Soon there'll be packets again, with Algerian fruits.)

Oh, it will not bear polish, the ancient potato,  
Needn't be nourished by Caesars, will blow anywhere,  
Hidden by nature, counted-on, stubborn and blind.

You may have noticed the bush that it pushes to air,  
Comical-delicate, sometimes with second-rate flowers  
Awkward and milky and beautiful only to hunger.

*Richard Wilbur*

## FOOLS ENCOUNTERED

We fared to seek the Fair and Gay,  
Nymphs rampant on a field of grapes  
Fools, encountered on the way,  
We bid have done with prancing japes

The fools came maundering, blub, behind  
Their folly bruit in the trees  
We turned with gestures and we twined,  
We bound their foolish hands to knees

Their buttocks speckled, saffron-pipped,  
We weaned them to a chequered cage  
The air came crystal as we stepped  
To soil of an Eleusian age

The lotus-lilied river Phlack  
We crossed in barges, tiered and blue,  
We came upon Pan's cloven track  
And slopes where briar and olive grew

Seven dancers on the hill  
With motion wrought the airs of dawn  
The leaves wrought angled light to fill  
A blazon, of that motion borne

The distant rocks, the stirring beech,  
The water was the only sound.  
When banished to the world of speech  
We stood with silence swathed and bound

*E. Lucas Myers*

## THE EVIL EYE (from READINGS OF HISTORY)

Last night we sat with the stereopticon,  
laughing at genre views of 1906,  
till suddenly, gazing straight into  
that fringed and tasselled parlor, where the vestal  
spurns an unlikely suitor  
with hairy-crested plants to right and left,  
my heart sank. It was terrible.  
I smelled the mildew in those swags of plush,  
dust on the eyepiece bloomed to freaks of mould.  
I knew beyond all doubt how dead that couple was.

Today, a fresh clean morning.  
Your camera stabs me unawares,  
right in my mortal part.  
A womb of celluloid already  
contains my dotage and my total absence.

*Adrienne Rich*

## LIVING IN SIN

She had thought the studio would keep itself;  
no dust upon the furniture of love.  
Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,  
the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,

a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat  
stalking the picturesque amusing mouse  
had risen at his urging.  
Not that at five each separate stair would writhe  
under the milkman's tramp; that morning light  
so coldly would delineate the scraps  
of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;  
that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers  
a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own—  
envoy from some black village in the mouldings . . .  
Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,  
sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,  
declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,  
rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;  
while she, jeered by the minor demons,  
pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found  
a towel to dust the table-top,  
and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.  
By evening she was back in love again,  
though not so wholly but throughout the night  
she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming  
like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

*Adrienne Rich*

## MOVING IN WINTER

Their life, collapsed like unplayed cards,  
Is carried piecemeal through the snow:  
Headboard and footboard now, the bed  
Where she has lain desiring him,  
Where overhead his sleep will build  
Its canopy to smother her once more;  
Their table, by four elbows worn  
Evening after evening while the wax runs down;  
Mirrors grey with repeating them;  
Bureaus confining from the cold  
Things that can shuffle in a drawer;  
Carpets rolled up around those echoes  
Which, shaken out, take wing and breed  
New altercations, the old silences.

*Adrienne Rich*

## “MORE LIGHT! MORE LIGHT!”

Composed in the Tower before his execution  
Those moving verses, and being brought at that time  
Painfully to the stake, submitted, declaring thus:  
“I implore my God to witness that I have made no crime.”

Nor was he forsaken of courage, but the death was horrible,  
The sack of gunpowder failing to ignite.  
His legs were blistered sticks on which the black sap  
Bubbled and burst as he howled for the Kindly Light.

And that was but one, and by no means one of the worst;  
Permitted at least his pitiful dignity;  
And such as were by made prayers in the name of Christ,  
That shall judge all men, for his soul's tranquility.

We move now to outside a German wood.  
Three men are there commanded to dig a hole  
In which the two Jews are ordered to lie down  
and be buried alive by the third, who is a Pole.

Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill  
Nor light from heaven appeared. But he did refuse.  
A Lüger settled back deeply in its glove.  
He was ordered to change places with the Jews.

Much casual death had drained away their souls.  
The thick dirt mounted toward the quivering chin.  
When only the head was exposed the order came  
To dig him out again and to get back in.

No light, no light in the blue Polish eye.  
When he finished a riding boot packed down the earth.  
The Lüger hovered lightly in its glove.  
He was shot in the belly and in three hours bled to death.

No prayers or incense rose up in those hours  
Which grew to be years, and every day came mute  
Ghosts from the ovens, sifting through crisp air,  
And settled upon his eyes in a black soot.

*Anthony Hecht*

CONCERNING THE PAINTING  
“AFTERNOON IN INFINITY”  
BY ATTILIO SALEMME

I saw some boards sleeping  
In your high noon of the infinite.  
On each you scribbled eyes, ears and a nose  
And a mouth saying: “Since we are pieces of lumber,  
We rest here.  
Had we been lucky, and on another canvas,  
We would be men, clasping the bride Time.”

*Hyam Plutzik*

THE NATIVE  
FOR AGATHA AND STEPHEN FASSETT

He and his, unwashed all winter,  
In that abandoned land in the punished  
North, in a gnashing house sunk as a cheek,  
Nest together, a bunting bundle crumpled  
Like a handkerchief on the croaking  
Back-broken bed jacked up in the kitchen; the clock  
Soon stops, they just keep the cooker going; all  
Kin to begin with when they crawl in under,  
Who covers who they don't care.

He and his, in the settled cozy,  
Steam like a kettle, rock-a-bye, the best  
Went west long ago, got out from under,  
Waved bye-bye to the steep scratched fields and scabby  
Pastures: their chapped plaster of newspapers  
Still chafes from the walls, and snags of string tattling  
Of their rugs trail yet from stair-nails. The rest,  
Never the loftiest, left to themselves,  
Descended, descended.



Most that's his, at the best of times,  
Looks about to fall: the propped porch lurches  
Through a herd of licked machines crutched in their last  
Seizures, each as ominously leaning  
As the framed ancestors, trapped in their collars,  
Beetling out of oval clouds from the black  
Tops of the rooms, their unappeasable jowls  
By nothing but frayed, faded cords leashed  
To the leaking walls.

But they no more crash  
Onto him and his than the cobwebs, or  
The gritted rafters, though on the summer-people's  
Solid houses the new-nailed shingles open  
All over like doors, flap, decamp, the locked  
Shutters peel wide to wag like clappers  
At the clattering windows, and the cold chimneys  
Scatter bricks downwind, like the smoking heads  
Of dandelions.

In this threadbare barn, through  
The roof like a snag-toothed graveyard the snow  
Cradles and dives onto the pitched backs  
Of his cow and the plowhorse each thin as hanging  
Laundry, and it drifts deep on their spines  
So that one beast or other, almost every winter  
Lets its knees stiffly down and freezes hard  
To the barn floor; but his summer employers  
Always buy him others.

For there is no one else  
Handy in summer, there in winter,  
And he and his can dream at pleasure,  
It is said, of houses burning, and do so  
All through the cold, till the spooled snakes sleeping under  
The stone dairy-floor stir with the turned year,  
Waken, and sliding loose in their winter skins  
Like air rising through thin ice, feed themselves forth  
To inherit the earth.

*W. S. Merwin*

## PEDIGREES

Considering the Conqueror's  
Fish-eyed, rabbit-chinned  
Progeny, chests and brains aped from the pigeon,

The Mayflower's spreading heritage  
Of turkey wattles,  
Crowned heads correct above skins of weasels,

The scions of robber barons  
(Only too often  
Rats constructed around livers of hens)

Those sports half hog, half horse,  
The wallowing gentry,  
Dowager ducks, titled ungulates,

What bestiality can we call our own,  
We the ordinary  
Descendants of Nobody?

*W. S. Merwin*

## ANOTHER YEAR COME

I have nothing new to ask of you,  
Future, heaven of the poor.  
I am still wearing the same things.

I am still begging the same question  
By the same light,  
Eating the same stone,

And the hands of the clock still knock without entering.

*W. S. Merwin*

## THE STOIC: FOR LAURA VON COURTEN

All winter long you listened for the boom  
Of distant cannon wheeled into their place.  
Sometimes outside beneath a bombers' moon  
You stood alone to watch the searchlights trace

Their careful webs against the boding sky,  
While miles away on Munich's vacant square  
The bombs lunged down with an unruly cry  
Whose blast you saw yet could but faintly hear.

And might have turned your eyes upon the gleam  
Of a thousand years of snow, where near the clouds  
The Alps ride massive to their full extreme,  
And season after season glacier crowds

The dark, persistent smudge of conifers.  
Or seen beyond the hedge and through the trees  
The shadowy forms of cattle on the furze,  
Their dim coats white with mist against the freeze.

Or thought instead of other times than these,  
Of other countries and of other sights:  
Eternal Venice sinking by degrees  
Into the very water that she lights;

Reflected in canals, the lucid dome  
Of Maria dell' Salute at your feet,  
Her triple spires disfigured by the foam.  
Remembered in Berlin the parks, the neat

Footpaths and lawns, the clean spring foliage,  
Where just short weeks before, a bomb, unaimed,  
Had freed a raging lion from its cage,  
Which in the mottled dark that trees enflamed

Killed one who hurried homeward from the raid.  
And by yourself there standing in the chill  
You must, with so much known, have been afraid  
And chosen such a mind of constant will,

Which, though all time corrode with constant hurt,  
Remains, until it occupies no space,  
That which it is; and passionless, inert,  
Becomes at last no meaning and no place.

*Edgar Bowers*

## THE WAY

My love's manners in bed  
are not to be discussed by me,  
as mine by her  
I would not credit comment upon gracefully.

But I ride by that margin of the lake in  
the wood, the castle;  
and the excitement of strongholds;  
and have a small boy's notion of doing good.

Oh well, I will say here,  
knowing each man,  
let you find a good wife too,  
and love her as hard as you can.

*Robert Creeley*

## KIND SIR: THESE WOODS

For a man needs only to be turned around once  
with his eyes shut in this world to be lost . . . Not  
till we are lost . . . do we begin to find ourselves.

*Thoreau, Walden*

Kind Sir: This is an old game  
that we played when we were eight and ten.  
Sometimes on The Island, in down Maine,  
in late August, when the cold fog blew in  
off the ocean, the forest between Dingley Dell  
and grandfather's cottage grew white and strange.  
It was as if every pine tree were a brown pole  
we did not know; as if day had rearranged  
into night and bats flew in sun. It was a trick  
to turn around once and know you were lost;  
knowing the crow's horn was crying in the dark,  
knowing that supper would never come, that the coast's  
cry of doom from that far away bell buoy's bell  
said *your nursemaid is gone*. O Mademoiselle,  
the rowboat rocked over. Then you were dead.  
Turn around once, eyes tight, the thought in your head.

Kind Sir: Lost and of your same kind  
I have turned around twice with my eyes sealed  
and the woods were white and my night mind  
saw such strange happenings, untold and unreal.  
And opening my eyes, I am afraid of course  
to look—this inward look that society scorns—  
Still, I search in these woods and find nothing worse  
than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns.

*Anne Sexton*

## SOME FOREIGN LETTERS

I knew you forever and you were always old,  
soft white lady of my heart. Surely you would scold  
me for sitting up late, reading your letters,  
as if these foreign postmarks were meant for me.  
You posted them first in London, wearing furs  
and a new dress in the winter of eighteen-ninety.  
I read how London is dull on Lord Mayor's Day,  
where you guided past groups of robbers, the sad holes  
of Whitechapel, clutching your pocketbook, on the way  
to Jack the Ripper dissecting his famous bones.  
This Wednesday in Berlin, you say, you will  
go to a bazaar at Bismarck's house. And I  
see you as a young girl in a good world still,  
writing three generations before mine. I try  
to reach into your page and breathe it back . . .  
but life is a trick, life is a kitten in a sack.

This is the sack of time your death vacates.  
How distant you are on your nickel-plated skates  
in the skating park in Berlin, gliding past  
me with your Count, while a military band  
plays a Strauss waltz. I loved you last,  
a pleated old lady with a crooked hand.  
Once you read *Lohengrin* and every goose  
hung high while you practised castle life  
in Hanover. Tonight your letters reduce  
history to a guess. The Count had a wife.  
You were the old maid aunt who lived with us.

Tonight I read how the winter howled around  
the towers of Schloss Schwöbber, how the tedious  
language grew in your jaw, how you loved the sound  
of the music of the rats tapping on the stone  
floors. When you were mine you wore an earphone.

This is Wednesday, May 9th, near Lucerne,  
Switzerland, sixty-nine years ago. I learn  
your first climb up Mount San Salvatore;  
this is the rocky path, the hole in your shoes,  
the yankee girl, the iron interior  
of her sweet body. You let the Count choose  
your next climb. You went together, armed  
with alpine stocks, with ham sandwiches  
and *seltzer wasser*. You were not alarmed  
by the thick woods of briars and bushes,  
nor the rugged cliff, nor the first vertigo  
up over Lake Lucerne. The Count sweated  
with his coat off as you waded through top snow.  
He held your hand and kissed you. You rattled  
down on the train to catch a steamboat for home;  
or other postmarks: Paris, Verona, Rome.

This is Italy. You learn its mother tongue.  
I read how you walked on the Palatine among  
the ruins of the palaces of the Caesars;  
alone in the Roman autumn, alone since July.  
When you were mine they wrapped you out of here  
with your best hat over your face. I cried  
because I was seventeen. I am older now.  
I read how your student ticket admitted you  
into the private chapel of the Vatican and how  
you cheered with the others, as we used to do  
on the Fourth of July. One Wednesday in November  
you watched a balloon, painted like a silver ball,  
float up over the Forum, up over the lost emperors,  
to shiver its little modern cage in an occasional  
breeze. You worked your New England conscience out  
beside artisans, chestnut vendors and the devout.

Tonight I will learn to love you twice;  
learn your first days, your mid-Victorian face.  
Tonight I will speak up and interrupt  
your letters, warning you that wars are coming,  
that the Count will die, that you will accept  
your America back to live like a prim thing  
on the farm in Maine. I tell you, you will come  
here, to the suburbs of Boston, to see the blue-nose  
world go drunk each night, to see the handsome  
children jitterbug, to feel your left ear close  
one Friday at Symphony. And I tell you,  
you will tip your boot feet out of that hall,  
rocking from its sour sound, out onto  
the crowded street, letting your spectacles fall  
and your hair net tangle as you stop passers-by  
to mumble your guilty love while your ears die.

*Anne Sexton*

## THE MARSH

Swampstrife and spatterdock  
lull in the heavy waters;  
some thirty little frogs  
spring with each step you walk;  
a fish's belly glitters  
tangled by rotting logs.

Over near the grey rocks  
muskrats dip and circle.  
Out of his rim of ooze  
a silt-black pond snail walks  
inverted on the surface  
toward what food he may choose.

You look up; while you walk  
the sun bobs and is snarled  
in the enclosing weir  
of trees, in their dead stalks.  
Stick in the mud, old heart,  
what are you doing here?

*W. D. Snodgrass*

## OPERATION

From stainless steel basins of water  
They brought warm cloths and they washed me,  
From spun aluminium bowls, cold Zephiran sponges, fuming;  
Gripped in the dead yellow glove, a bright straight razor  
Inched on my stomach, down my groin,  
Paring the brown hair off. They left me  
White as a child, not frightened. I was not  
Ashamed. They clothed me, then,  
In the thin, loose, light, white garments,  
The delicate sandals of poor Pierrot,  
A schoolgirl first offering her sacrament.

I was drifting, inexorably, on toward sleep.  
In skullcaps, masked, in blue-green gowns, attendants  
Towed my cart, afloat in its white cloths,  
The body with its tributary poisons borne  
Down corridors of the diseased, thronging:  
The scrofulous faces, contagious grim boys,  
The huddled families, weeping, a staring woman  
Arched to her gnarled stick—a child was somewhere  
Screaming, screaming—then, blind silence, the elevator rising  
To the arena, humming, vast with lights; blank hero,  
Shackled and spellbound, to enact my deed.

Into flowers, into women, I have awakened.  
Too weak to think of strength, I have thought all day,  
Or dozed among standing friends. I lie in night, now,  
A small mound under linen like the drifted snow.  
Only by nurses visited, in radiance, saying, Rest.  
Opposite, ranked office windows glare; headlamps, below,  
Trace out our highways; their cargoes under dark tarpaulins,  
Trucks climb, thundering, and sirens may  
Wail for the fugitive. It is very still. In my brandy bowl  
Of sweet peas at the window, the crystal world  
Is inverted, slow and gay.

*W. D. Snodgrass*



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